

ERÖFFNUNG DER THYSEN-VORLESUNG VON PETER GREENAWAY

»My films show that I am a true atheist, although I always had the highest marks in Religious Education«. This quotation from Peter Greenaway suggests, ladies and gentlemen, that it gives the theologian, who has temporarily slipped into the role of university president, a certain mischievous pleasure to deliver the opening speech this evening. We are about to listen to the last Berlin Thyssen lecture for the time being, which deals with the iconology of the present day and is being presented by a highly respected contemporary artist, who has a fascinating position on religion as became obvious from my introductory words. There are some boring theologians, who don't want to know anything about atheists, and there are boring atheists, who don't want to know anything about theology – and on some occasions, the president of a university is required to deliver speeches in honour of these contemporaries. Such greetings tend to drag through the various stages of these boring people's lives, spiced up, perhaps, with a few tomfooleries about life and the world in general.

This procedure is hardly necessary for a greeting in honour of Peter Greenaway – not only because he is the sort of astute atheist who knows a lot about theology, but also because he is one of the few contemporaries who teaches us to look beyond. He teaches us, for example, that Rembrandt was not a painter. »I beg your pardon?«, a surprised interviewer exclaimed in reaction to this statement. Rembrandt was not a painter? »Indeed, Rembrandt was not a painter. And the Nightwatch is not a painting.« What is it then, if it is not a painting? »It is a theatrical play, an incredibly lively performance«. That, ladies and gentlemen, is the iconography of the present: Rembrandt's Nightwatch interpreted as a drama about murder, transferred onto the canvas and captured in celluloid. And talking about it so cleverly that an interviewer is dumbfounded. Iconology of the present. Gottfried Böhm and Horst Bredekamp have skilfully organised a respectable series of lectures focussing on this subject and have moderated it in an equally inspiring manner. The Fritz-Thyssen-Foundation generously provided the necessary funds for this endeavour. Words of gratitude should also be expressed to Jürgen Regge. Among the lecturers, who have enlightened us on this topic, was not only a true atheist, but also a veritable Cardinal, an art historian from Chicago and a philosopher from Jena. Peter Greena-

way explains the reasons for reflecting about the iconography of the present more adequately than a theologian could. Once again, the artist managed to render the interviewer speechless when he said: »You know, most people are visual illiterates«. Indeed, dear Peter Greenaway, dear Gottfried Böhm, dear Horst Bredekamp, they drown in the flood of pictures, in the sea of sensations. »I believe that the present-day is more baroque than the Baroque period ever was«. So Greenaway says. Referring to the visual illiterates, this can only mean: in the Baroque period the importance of emblems, colours and sounds was clear – well, at least it was clear to God, Who heard the encrypted symbols in the music of the Bach cantatas and set His eyes on the reticulated – für meine deutschen Zuhörer: verästelt – copper book covers in His heavenly library – but these days, the visual illiterates are mute when presented with the sensually over-presented, uncoded and non-reticulated baroque abundance. This has developed – again, I am quoting Greenaway – because we are obsessed by the baroque idea that »quantity can transact into quality«.

There are a few, almost too few, Thyssen-lectures about the iconology of the present. Quantity in listeners, quality in the lectures. But maybe this is precisely the key to understanding the excellent lecture-series at the alma mater Berolinenses: quantity does not transact into quality – instead, as we can learn here in Berlin, there is more than the aesthetics of Prussian soberness, more than the punctuality from Königsberg, which is garbed in black, always dressed in the same robe and appears at precisely the same time: there is also a baroque abundance in painting, scripture, architecture and music. The cook, the thief, the wife, her lover and many, many others. I would like to welcome you all to today's lecture, and in particular you, dear Peter Greenaway.